

Rating the World's Best Restaurants: ITALY

With this page on Italy, the IHT's restaurant critic, Patricia Wells, completes her search for the world's top restaurants, and compiles her list of the Top 10 restaurants around the world, and the Top 10 more casual and affordable restaurants.

The Top Tables

- No. 1: Osteria da Fiore, San Polo-calle del Scalet, Venice, tel: (41) 721-308.
- No. 2: Da Cesare, 12 Via Umberto, Albaretto della Torre (45 kilometers south of Asti), tel: (173) 520-141.
- No. 3: Ristorante Aimo e Nadia, 6 Via Montecuccoli, Milan, tel: (2) 416-886.

On this the world agrees: Italian food is the most satisfying, among the most diversified, and the most popular cuisine in the world. Although French cuisine is considered superior in terms of finesse and sheer ability to overwhelm the senses, I would not reject a lifetime diet of Italian pasta, vegetables, cheeses, wine and breads.

Of the dozens of meals I've savored throughout Italy in recent years, my visits to Venice's Osteria da Fiore remain culinary benchmarks. Chef Mara Martin and her husband, Maurizio, are wizards

of understatement, offering diners the purest possible cuisine based solely on local fresh fish and shellfish. Arrive with an open palate, anticipating tastes, flavors, textures you've never before experienced.

Much of the Martins' greatness lies in chef Mara's willingness to lose her ego to the ingredients, dignifying them with irreproachable preparations that may include nothing more than a gentle touch of heat, a drop of lemon juice, a drizzle of oil. What bravery, what confidence.

The smaller the shellfish the more intense the flavor, and that theory is played out on the quietly elegant tables of Da Fiori daily, as miniature shrimp, octopus, spider crabs, cuttlefish and scallops arrive in an almost rhythmic succession. There may be baby shrimp, flawlessly fried, so sweet you recall the haunting flavor of newly toasted hazelnuts. Tiny octopus are simmered, then allowed to cool in their cooking water, arriving lukewarm, all softness and silk, showered with olive oil and paired with a welcoming salad of minced baby celery stalks. Rice is elevated to its highest order with Mara's cuttlefish-ink risotto, so rich, so sweet, you eat as slowly as possible, hoping for a loaves-and-fishes miracle. Anyone who has ever grilled a fish should try Da Fiori's masterfully grilled turbot to sample the heights to reach for: fish that's moist, evenly cooked, silken in texture and sweet in flavor.

With no previous experience, the Martins transformed a neighborhood bar into a restaurant that's a model of crisp precision, restrained with white linens, delicate glassware and framed Venetian prints, and that has a clientele that includes real Venetians and casual families who bring their children for Saturday lunch. There is room for no more than 40 diners, so reservations are essential, and difficult to obtain.

With dessert — often peach ice cream or lemon sorbet, served with delicate cookies — sample one of the Veneto's great white wines, Torcolato, a sweet and lemony full-grown dessert wine that's neither cloying nor sticky.

Closed Sunday, Monday, Dec. 25 to Jan. 15, and August. Credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, Eurocard, Visa. A la carte, 45,000 to 75,000 lire (\$28 to \$48), not including service or wine. Reservations essential.

For many of the world's top chefs, going to market means picking up a telephone. For the lean, mustached 48-year-old Cesare Giaccone, a typical market day involves driving hundreds of kilometers through the Piedmont countryside, visiting one farmer for fragrant white truffles and varied wild mushrooms, another for freshly hunted wild boar, a third for half a dozen just slaughtered chickens, which he will pluck and dress himself.

Much of Da Cesare's cuisine might be described as primordial, it is so earthy and rudimentary, like spit-roasted goat cooked in the corner of the restaurant over beech and oakwood coals, or his thick fillet of beef seared on a scorching-hot limestone rock. Yet other dishes — an ethereal guinea-hen mousse paired with roasted potatoes drizzled with grappa — seem to have come special delivery on the wings of an angel.

It's hard to know whether Cesare is a gentle man with a wild streak or a wild man with a gentle streak, for over the years his cowboy-style behavior has guaranteed him the reputation of an iconoclast. There's not much about Da Cesare's that's user-friendly: He may open or close the restaurant on a whim; there's no sign, so finding it the first time around on your own could be a trial; he's expensive, and he doesn't take credit cards.

Yet a visit to Cesare's little culinary palace can be a gastronomic milestone. Aided by his sons, Filippo and Oscar, he cooks his heart out, offering miracles from the stove, the oven, the fire. The small



dining room is immaculate, with delicate Riedel crystal, a different hand-crocheted cloth for each table, waitresses in crisp black and white.

A sonata of flavors can be found in his fall salad of raw sliced porcini and tender white ovoli wild mushrooms, married with pomegranate seeds, fresh chestnuts, a tangle of greens, a shaving of Parmesan, walnuts, sliced pheasant, turkey and rabbit, united in a refreshing orange vinaigrette.

He roasts onions on a bed of salt until the skin resembles burnished mahogany, the interior fragrant, creamy and mellow, enriched by a touch of fonduta cheese and a shaving of white truffles.

I was overwhelmed by the purity, the lack of trickery in his spit-roasted goat, seasoned with nothing but salt, pepper and olive oil. Cooked for four hours, the young goat turns crisp, crackly, resulting in meat that's firm, chewy and fragrant, with an imperceptible smokiness reminiscent of the finest bacon or ham. Likewise, the sheer simplicity of beef and rosemary branches cooked on a thick rock that had been heated in a hot oven offers pure joy — a finely crisp exterior, tender juicy interior, topped with cubed tomatoes and herbs that tumble onto the rock as you slice into the meat.

Desserts include hazelnut cookies baked in hazelnut leaves (like a child's fantasy, hazelnuts that turn into cookies on the tree) and a feather-light croustade of apples and apricots in exemplary puff pastry.

The best of the Piedmont wines are found at Cesare's table, including Domenico Clerico's 1990 Arto, a powerful barrel-aged wine that's half nebbiolo, half barbera.

Closed Tuesday, Wednesday lunch, January and August. No credit cards. A la carte, 90,000 lire per person, including service but not wine. Reservations essential.

Understatement is the key to the cooking at Aimo e Nadia, a modern, upscale dining room, away from the center of Milan. With husband Aimo Moroni in the dining room, wife Nadia in the kitchen, and daughter Stefania at the cash register, this is a solid, family affair.

The Moroni cuisine is 100 percent Italian, yet dishes found here won't turn up elsewhere. Rather than cooking, Nadia waves a gentle, magic wand, whether she is turning the richest, freshest ricotta cheese into a soup-like liquid flavored with fresh porcini mushrooms and a touch of rich grana padano cheese, or weaving a complex appetizer of fresh anchovies stuffed with a mix of spinach and pine nuts, anointed by a touch of celery sauce faintly seasoned with hot pepper.

Perfection arrives in the form of a raw wild mushroom salad of delicately earthy white ovoli, sliced paper thin and seasoned with rich Tuscan oil and lemon juice.

The menu changes from day to day, according to what's in the market, and on my last visit Nadia offered two exquisite swordfish preparations: In one, she floated tiny squares of fresh, baby swordfish in a white bean purée; in the other, the delicate swordfish steak was barely cooked, then paired with plump fresh borlotti beans.

Wine choices include some top-rate wines from Piedmont and Tuscany, including Aldo Conterno's astonishing 1982 Barolo Granbussia, Quercchio's 1985 Brunello di Montalcino, and Elio Altare's 1985 Barolo Vigna Arborina.

Closed Saturday lunch, Sunday, and August. Credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, Visa. 95,000 lire tasting menu. A la carte, 78,000 to 120,000 lire, including service but not wine.



Top, Pina Bongiovanni in Osteria dell'Unione, in Treiso; above left, chef Mara Martin and her husband, Maurizio, in Osteria da Fiore in Venice; above right, Cesare Giaccone in Da Cesare, in Albaretto della Torre.

CASUAL DINING

- No. 1: Checchino dal 1887, 30 Via di Monte Testaccio, Rome, tel: (6) 574-6318.
- No. 2: Cibrè, 8r Via del Verrocchio, Florence, tel: (55) 234-1100.
- No. 3: Osteria dell'Unione, 1 Via Alba, Treiso (7 kilometers east of Alba), tel: (173) 638-303.

International Herald Tribune

WELCOME to the land of bright lights, loud voices, full flavors: With a cuisine that's earthy, rich, traditional — as well as wildly creative — Rome's Checchino dal 1887 captures the essence of a solid, great Italian trattoria.

The brothers Elio and Francesco Mariani, along with their mother, Ninetta, carry on the family tradition, with a restaurant begun in 1887 to feed workers building the city slaughterhouse. Cuts of meat from the "fifth quarter" — tripe and organ meats — remain a specialty. Great dishes here include a delicate head cheese seasoned with black pepper and drizzled with olive oil; their famed *coda alla vaccinara*, hearty and wholesome portions of oxtail stewed in a rich tomato sauce with celery, pine nuts and raisins, and a state-of-the-art *spaghetti alla Carbonara*, steaming with eggs, pecorino and black pepper.

Their trustworthy combinations of cheese and wine include a breathtaking trio of Gorgonzola cheese drizzled with honey and served with a glass of aged De Bartoli Marsala from Sicily, haunting with flavors of wood and caramel.

Closed Sunday dinner and Monday (all day Sunday from June to September), Au-

gust and Christmas week. Credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, Visa, MasterCard. A la carte, 55,000 to 90,000 lire (\$35 to \$57), including service but not wine.

I wouldn't think of visiting Florence without a dinner at Cibrè, the homey, popular trattoria run by the outgoing Fabio Picchi and his wife, Benedetta. Tuscan natives, the two were childhood sweethearts who went on to create a small Cibrè empire near the Sant'Ambrogio market. They reign over a quietly elegant restaurant with a bare-bones trattoria on the other side of the kitchen; a small, elegant café, as well as a carry-out shop that features honey, oil, olives and preserves from the region.

My last dinner here began with a procession of exquisite antipasto samplings, including marinated salads of first-of-season raw fava beans and salty pecorino sheep's milk cheese; traditional chicken-liver spread, and slices of fresh goat cheese with hot peppers. Much of the year Fabio offers his now-famed yellow-pepper soup, *passato di peperoni*.

But one item you'll never find at Cibrè is pasta: Fabio and Benedetta prefer to display their culinary creativity here in other ways. If it's on the menu, sample a slice of pecorino cheese served with *mostarda di Cremona*, preserved in sugar syrup and flavored with a fiery mustard. The cave offers some real treasures, including the rare Le Pergole Torte, from the estate of Sergio Manetti.

Closed Sunday, Monday and August. Credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, Visa, MasterCard. Trattoria 30,000

lire, restaurant 60,000 lire, not including wine and service.

Close your eyes and picture the quintessential trattoria: There's no sign, just a double door covered with immaculate white curtains. There's no menu, just a procession of staunchly traditional Piedmont specialties, prepared with love. There's no wine list, just a series of terrific local wines lined up along the shelves. The food? Quality flavors at once rich and intense, all subtle, simple, seductive dishes that come from the kitchen of smiling, bright-faced Pina Bongiovanni, born in this house and following in her mother's footsteps.

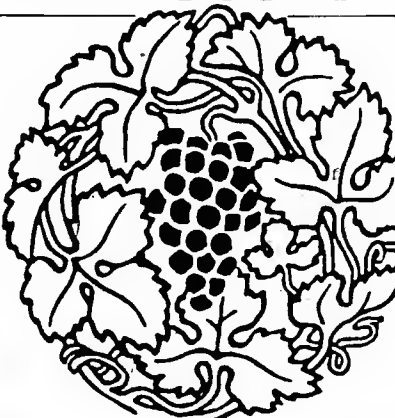
Starters at Osteria dell'Unione might include rounds of moist, steaming herbal fritatta, very thin and generously seasoned, paired with slices of local sausage. A flawless rendition of *vitello tonnato* arrives from the tiny kitchen, poached veal sliced paper thin and topped with a creamy tuna sauce, a cheery rendition of what's often a tired Italian classic.

Her favorite dish is also her best, an exquisite platter of rabbit in Barolo with sweet red peppers spiked with cloves and cinnamon, a dish for cooks short on money, rich on time. The rabbit meat all but falls off the bone.

The wine shelves offer some treasures, including Luigi Pelissero's 1990 Barbaresco, a wine with a perfect acid balance, custom-made for a region where food is hearty and copious.

Closed Sunday dinner, Monday and two weeks in August. No credit cards. 40,000 lire fixed-price menu, including service but not wine. Reservations essential.

THE TOP 10



Following is the IHT's list of the 10 best restaurants in the world, and the 10 best casual tables. The list includes reviews on Hong Kong, Tokyo, the United States, France, the Benelux countries, Spain, Britain, Switzerland, Germany and Italy.

The Top Tables

- No. 1: Joël Robuchon, 59 Avenue Raymond-Poincaré, Paris 16, tel: 47-27-12-27.
- No. 2: Restaurant Fredy Girardet, 1 Route d'Yverdon, Crissier (6 kilometers west of Lausanne), Switzerland, tel: (21) 634-0505.
- No. 3: Lai Ching Heen, The Regent, Salisbury Road, Hong Kong, tel: 721-1211.
- No. 4: Le Louis XV-Alain Ducasse, Hôtel de Paris, Place du Casino, Monte Carlo, Monaco, tel: 92-16-30-01.
- No. 5: Osteria da Fiore, San Polo-calle del Scalet, Venice, tel: (41) 721-308.
- No. 6: Jiro, Chuo-ku, Ginza 4-2-15, Tsukamoto Sozan Building (B1, basement), Tokyo, tel: 3535-3600.
- No. 7: Guy Savoy, 18 Rue Troyon, Paris 17, tel: 43-80-40-61.
- No. 8: Taillevent, 15 Rue Lamennais, Paris 8, tel: 45-63-96-01 and 45-61-12-90.
- No. 9: Restaurant Daniel, 20 East 76th Street, New York, tel: (212) 288-0033.
- No. 10: Da Cesare, 12 Via Umberto, Albaretto della Torre (45 kilometers south of Asti), Italy, tel: (173) 520-141.

Casual Dining

- No. 1: Al Forno, 577 South Main Street, Providence, Rhode Island, tel: (401) 273-9767.
- No. 2: La Tupina, 6 Porte de la Monnaie, Bordeaux, tel: 56-91-56-37.
- No. 3: Frontera Grill, 445 North Clark Street, Chicago, tel: (312) 661-1434.
- No. 4: City Chiu Chow Restaurant, East Ocean Centre, 98 Granville Road, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon, Hong Kong, tel: 723-6226.
- No. 5: Ca l'Isidre, Les Flors 12, Barcelona, tel: 441-1139.
- No. 6: The Seafood Restaurant, Riverside, Padstow, Cornwall PL28 8BY, England, tel: (841) 532-485.
- No. 7: Checchino dal 1887, 30 Via Monte Testaccio, Rome, tel: (6) 574-6318.
- No. 8: Cibrè, 8r Via del Verrocchio, Florence, tel: (55) 234-1100.
- No. 9: Viridiana, Juan de Mena 14, Madrid, tel: 523-4478.
- No. 10: Le Caméléon, 6 Rue de Chevreuse, Paris 6, tel: 43-20-63-43.

TIPS

IN EVITABLY, when an Italian chef cooks with a French accent, he falls flat on his face. Here are thoughts on visits to two top-rated Italian restaurants, both of them definitely NOT worth the detour.

One recent sunny Sunday afternoon, I drove to Gualtiero Marchesi's Michelin three-star restaurant (Gualtiero Marchesi, at Erbusco near Milan), dreaming of roast chicken. And there it was on the menu, served with a simple garnish of potatoes, mushrooms and onions. We waited patiently, consuming an unimpressive first course of fish, an unimpressive second course of pasta, a nice white wine, all the while dreaming of a plump, moist roast chicken. The waiter rolled a cart to the table, and from the black cast-iron pot came the most shriveled, dried-out bird I've ever seen. We were served tidbits of bone-dry white meat — not a drop of juice, sauce, moisture — accompanied by a few bites of mushrooms, a rock-hard potato, a tiny roasted onion. We signaled the waiter, requesting a bit of juice, and were informed: "This is dry-roasted chicken, style Marchesi." By any standards, it was a very badly roasted chicken. I wouldn't have served such a bird, and neither should he.

While the Umbrian Gualtiero Marchesi is commonly hailed as one of the top chefs in Italy, I found the food at Vissani, along route 448 between Todi and Basschi, inexcusably self-indulgent and a major affront to good taste and judgment. It is impossible to imagine any sane diner seeking satisfaction in fatty morsels of chicken set adrift in a greasy Gorgonzola soup; tough, lukewarm duck breast supported by a gluey mound of ravioli filled with bits of undercooked artichokes, or a tepee of tepid risotto camouflaged by strips of eggplant as tough as shoe leather. Service and setting are charmless, the wine list a jumble, prices very likely the highest in Italy. Lunch for two can easily run 600,000 lire (\$380), without wine. The sheer amount of food that is inevitably wasted (no less than a dozen silly breads, flavored with everything from foie gras to peanuts) should make chef Vissani hang his head in shame.

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